

School Recovery after a Critical Incident or Tragedy

This document is intended for school teams to provide best practice guidance after a small or large scale incident or tragedy impacting your school community

- **The Role of the School Crisis Team (or other core leadership team)**
 - This group needs to be highly visible in the school and will likely need to meet 2-3x/day (morning, lunchtime, afterschool) to coordinate all response activities and ensure strong communication.
 - Depending on the type of incident or tragedy, others may join this group including the superintendent, the lead mental health support, etc.

- **School Scheduling**
 - Routine and flexibility are key parts of the recovery process. As best as possible, maintain a regular class schedule with readily available options outside of class for students who are not able to engage in the classroom (such as a staffed quiet space). This may include having regularly scheduled exams or events but readily giving students a makeup or alternative option.
 - Even for an incident with school-wide impact, some students may not want to go to a funeral or memorial service for a variety of reasons. This decision should be left with the student and parents/guardians. If a service is held during the school day, maintain classes or provide an alternative.

- **Identifying Students/Staff of Concern**
 - In the hours or days after an incident, the School Crisis Team can make a list of students and staff who are most impacted. This may include siblings, best friends, teammates, current or former classroom teachers, coaches, etc. Additionally, students or staff can be identified who may not be directly involved but may be vulnerable (those who have experienced recent loss, etc.).
 - The School Crisis Team can make a plan for who specifically will check in with the people on this list, what supports can be offered and at what intervals the check ins should occur.

- **Maintaining Communication**
 - Identify one point person for internal and external communication.
 - Use the sample announcements and letters in the resources below as a guide.
 - Frequent communication with parents/guardians and the community is key as it provides reassurance that the school has a good plan and can be a reminder of supports available to students and the greater community.

- **Consider Outside Mental Health Support**
 - Even small scale incidents can have significant reverberations for a school community. It can be hard to ask for or accept outside assistance but this is often necessary to bolster your in-house supports.
 - Mental health supports may include school counselors from another school district, providers from your local designated agency (Crisis Team, Outpatient

program, School Services), and, for staff/faculty, the Employee Assistance Program.

- Resiliency and Recovery:
 - Establish resiliency building plans for supporting students and the school community including the use of therapy dogs, creating a drop in space for people to write cards or draw pictures, having a sensory space, and hosting mindfulness workshops, yoga classes and/or drumming circles. All of these interventions are trauma-informed and promote healing if facilitated by someone with proper training.
 - Young people grieve differently from adults. This can be hard for parents/guardians and even sometimes school staff to understand. Provide information to adults about understanding grief (see resources below). Provide information to students that is age appropriate.
 - Large group gatherings can be hard for some students and even triggering. Avoid school-wide assemblies or gatherings in the auditorium if at all possible. Instead, provide information and support in classrooms or in small groups.
 - Students, parents/guardians, staff and the greater community often want to “do” something tangible to honor those impacted by an incident. It is recommended that memorials are temporary and closely monitored (seek additional guidance from the resources below).

- A Note about Suicide
 - Stigma and the risk of suicide contagion or “copycat” suicides indicate that the response to a suicide death should be handled in a certain way. These best practices (see resources below) can mitigate risk while promoting healing and resilience.
 - It is important that the school response to a suicide death is similar to the response for any other death.
 - Having a written protocol is recommended so that decisions are made in an equitable way, especially related to fundraising for the impacted family, memorials including yearbook commemorations, and the school’s involvement with funeral or memorial service arrangements.

- A Note about Large Scale Incidents
 - An incident such as a school shooting or a mass casualty event needs special consideration.
 - Ensure an operational framework to identify qualified mental health professional who will aid in the response.
 - Established screening protocols for assessment and referral to additional services.
 - Emphasize resiliency and recovery in the school in the coming weeks and months but also throughout the school year (and in subsequent years).
 - Long term memorials need careful consideration using the resources below.

- Resources
 - Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration.
<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>
This is a free resources available for download and includes tools, protocols, guidelines and sample letters/announcements
 - Lifelines Postvention: Responding to a Suicide and Other Traumatic Death. Hazleden.
http://www.hazelden.org/OA_HTML/ibeCCtpItmDspRte.jsp?item=54103
This best practice guide is available for purchase. Many schools use the Lifelines Suicide Prevention curriculum.
 - The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families
<https://www.dougy.org/>
Resources and Tip Sheets for children, teens, parents and educators
 - The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
<http://www.nctsnet.org/resources>
Resources and tools for a variety of audiences